

Defending the North Amid Rising Geopolitical Tensions

As the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine approaches, Arctic countries have fully awoken to a new security paradigm in the region. With Sweden and Finland completing their NATO accession process in 2024, all seven non-Russian Arctic countries have emerged clear-eyed about the security threat posed by the Kremlin. The increasing frequency of interference with critical infrastructure across Northern Europe—combined with Europe's mostly timid response—highlights that Arctic states are far from fully ready to operate in this new security environment.

In this edition of *Northern Connections*, experts examine three issues that will heavily influence the trajectory of the region's security landscape. Collectively, the three articles illustrate the novel challenges facing a region that was long characterized by Arctic exceptionalism—the common understanding that unwritten rules, beliefs, and history protected the region from great power rivalry. For one, U.S. president-elect Donald Trump's unconventional approach to international diplomacy is putting pressure on the internal cohesion among Arctic NATO states. Trump's notion that U.S. ownership and control of Greenland is “**an absolute necessity**” for national security purposes is straining the bilateral relationship between the United States and Denmark, and the delicate relationship within the Kingdom of Denmark between Denmark and Greenland. Moreover, the increasing alignment of Russia and other revanchist powers has cast a shadow over the Arctic, as Sino-Russian cooperation has enabled China to expand on its limited foothold in the region. Lastly, Sweden's and Finland's accession into NATO will offer both opportunities and challenges in furthering the already robust defense integration among the four Nordic countries.

In the first article, Marc Jacobsen from the Royal Danish Defence College examines Greenland's 2024 foreign, security, and defense policy in the context of shifting Arctic security dynamics. He argues that increased international interest in the territory—particularly overtures from President-elect Trump—has positioned Greenland favorably in its quest for both short-term economic and political gains and its longer-term ambitions for independence from Denmark as a sovereign nation.

In the second article, Rebekka Åsnes Sagild from the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies at the Norwegian Defence University College evaluates the state of Sino-Russian cooperation in the European Arctic from China's perspective. She argues that as China's

attempts to increase investments and research projects in the region have faltered, Beijing has begun adopting a more pragmatic stance that prioritizes economic viability over geopolitical symbolism. While China's footprint in the region will likely remain limited, the potential development of Chinese dual-use research, a troubling pattern of sabotage incidents, and increasing maritime transport activity in the region warrant increased scrutiny.

In the third article, Esil Jakobsen and Øystein Solvang from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) examine new opportunities to integrate and expand the combat firepower of Nordic countries following Sweden's and Finland's accession to NATO. They argue that NATO can achieve highly effective defense and deterrence in the Nordic region through improved integration, pooling of assets, and cooperation between key allies.



IDA MARIE ODGAARD/AFP via Getty Images

Greenland and the Changing Arctic Security Dynamics: Threats and Opportunities in the Wake of Great Power Competition

Marc Jacobsen, Associate Professor, Royal Danish Defence College

“The United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity.” While announcing his nominee for the next U.S. ambassador to the Kingdom of Denmark on the social media platform Truth Social, President-elect Donald Trump made **his position on the Danish territory** clear. However, the reality of Greenlandic politics since the summer of 2019—when Trump first floated the idea of purchasing Greenland—indicates that the next step for Greenland's self-government is decidedly *not* to become an integrated part of the United States. Instead, the short-term aim is to strengthen Greenland's autonomy on the international scene, an important element in the long-term ambition of becoming a sovereign state. This position is made clear in a recent **strategy document** developed by Greenland's self-government, which is “essentially an expression of a Greenland that, in cooperation with others, is progressing towards independence.”

The document outlines defense and diplomatic endeavors for the country, with special attention on how dependency on Denmark could be lessened through new and existing international relations. Scholars have **recently provided** a *tour d'horizon* of the policy's content and context, while others have **analyzed** its use of ethos, logos, and pathos. Meanwhile, Jon Rahbek-Clemmensen and I have **previously argued** that the strategy's implementation is likely to facilitate better cooperation between Greenland's capital city

of Nuuk and Copenhagen in terms of security and defense. This article first uses the new strategy to explain how Greenland positions itself within the changing Arctic security environment. It then analyzes how amplified U.S. attention and Denmark's growing interest in Arctic affairs have contributed to further developing Greenland's diplomatic capacity.

GREENLAND'S (ENVISIONED) ROLE IN THE CHANGING ARCTIC SECURITY ENVIRONMENT

In its 2024 strategy, Greenland's priorities broadly have three foundations: (1) looking ahead to Greenland's future independence; (2) grounding strategy in Inuit culture; and (3) prioritizing values shared by Greenland's friends and allies, such as democracy, human rights, and respect for international law. These fundamentals serve as underlying reasons for establishing and enhancing Greenland's international relations while also delineating non-allied countries and potential adversaries, with the latter seldom explicitly mentioned by name and instead merely referred to as "certain countries."

One of the adversarial countries is surely Russia, which Greenland has traditionally been less skeptical toward than Denmark. However, the invasion of Ukraine has had a seismic effect and caused Greenlandic decisionmakers to expand their view on the security challenges facing the West. As such, Greenland swiftly joined EU sanctions against Russia, despite not being a member of the bloc. Moreover, defense matters have subsequently appeared more frequently in Greenland's political discourse, including in discussions on whether Nuuk could be a potential bomb target by the Kremlin because it is home to Denmark's Joint Arctic Command.

Although the 2024 strategy repeatedly emphasizes pacifist values rooted in Inuit culture, it leaves no doubt that Greenland will continue to be part of the Western alliance. Nuuk's commitment to Western institutions is also underlined by the inclusion of a Greenlandic diplomat within Denmark's permanent representation at NATO. Similarly, the document articulates a desire for Greenlanders to take a more active role in Danish sovereignty enforcement through participating in the Joint Arctic Command and the Sirius Patrol, establishing an administrative unit at the U.S. Pituffik Space Base, and eventually creating a nonmilitary coast guard of its own. These proposed initiatives reflect Nuuk's state-making ambitions in which protection of Westphalian sovereignty is a cornerstone. In this regard, Iceland serves as inspiration for how Greenland may cope with deteriorating Arctic security dynamics through nonmilitary means—thus adhering to Nuuk's pacifist values—while transitioning from a Danish colony to a sovereign state.

The strategy also represents a sober awareness of Greenland's inevitably geostrategic location, which plays "a key role in the defense of the United States against external threats, especially from the Arctic region," according to the document. Although it describes overt military threats as pertaining primarily to the United States, the document places the most immediate and direct threats to Greenland in the gray zone of conflict, including malicious cyberattacks and potential sabotage of crucial infrastructure. Regarding the security of critical infrastructure, the strategy emphasizes that "we cannot and shall not allow this infrastructure to be owned by foreign entities. This is essential for the safety of our people and our society."

Societal security is thus very high on the agenda in Greenland, where recent **cyber espionage attacks**, which left the government apparatus largely incapacitated, and **severe**

power outages have demonstrated the vulnerability of the small, remote community. Combined with experiences from the Covid-19 pandemic and debates surrounding **Huawei's bid for 5G** in the Faroe Islands, supply chain security and protections for strategic infrastructure from hostile actors are increasingly salient topics. In addition to the matter of ownership, the strategy emphasizes the importance of enhancing expertise, forging contingency plans, and strengthening cybersecurity capabilities, the last of which is done in close cooperation with the Danish Centre for Cyber Security, which **describes** the cyber threat level to Greenland as “very high.”

Greenland's most recent addition to its critical infrastructure is an extension of the **Nuuk airport** that will enable international connections, including a direct flight to New York beginning in the summer of 2025. Favorable loans from Denmark enabled the extension. The agreement **essentially prevented** involvement from a Chinese construction entrepreneur—in the process effectively limiting Chinese presence on the North American continent. Relatedly, while U.S. interest in Greenland has increased of late, Chinese interest in the country's mining potential has **cooled off** as local legislation and global market prices have changed.

DIPLOMATIC MOVES TOWARD GREATER INTERNATIONAL AGENCY

Trump's initial idea of purchasing Greenland in 2019 brought **renewed interest** to the region's geostrategic importance and mineral wealth while also fueling debate over its future constitutional status. Whereas many Greenlanders received Trump's idea as a neocolonial provocation driven by the spillover of geopolitical tensions into the Arctic, the increased U.S. attention proved to be a catalyst in the development of the Greenlandic self-government's diplomatic capacity.

In the following years, Greenland and the United States cultivated more direct relations after the 2020 opening of a U.S. consulate in Nuuk, an official visit by Secretary of State Antony Blinken in 2021, and various so-called economic aid packages earmarked for developing Greenland's mining sector, education, and tourism. The economic gains from the intensified bilateral relationship, however, are still quite limited. Greenland's 2024 strategy document frequently returns to this untapped potential through mentions of improved agreements and direct trading routes, while stating that “whenever possible, we intend to intensify our contact with the United States.” In fact, the strategy specifically suggests the establishment of an Arctic North American forum with commerce, communication, and, not least, culture as the founding principles.

The strategy document also proposes creating a Center for Peace in Greenland to strengthen dialogue and promote peace, an ambition expressed as: “We must remember who we are and our core values.” Interestingly, Japan is mentioned as an attractive source of inspiration due to its track record of promoting peace since World War II. The Greenlandic policy, however, fails to mention that Japan has recently become more militarized due to the threats from North Korea and China, resulting in a **historically high defense budget** announced in September 2024.

Whereas China is barely present in Greenland as of early 2025, the country opened a diplomatic representation in Beijing in 2024, primarily to improve its fisheries exports, which **constitute more than 90 percent** of Greenland's total exports. Additionally, Greenland

maintains diplomatic representations in Copenhagen, Brussels, Reykjavik, and Washington, D.C. The government has also **stated** that it wants to (re)create a representation in Ottawa, where it previously had one from 1998 to 2002. Greenland's strategy document explicitly encourages Canada to establish a consulate in Greenland as Iceland, the United States, and, most recently, the European Commission have done. Indeed, Canada **announced** in December 2024 that they will open a consulate in Nuuk. Moreover, a handful of countries have appointed honorary consuls, **including Russia**, which appointed the co-owner of major Greenlandic business corporation Polar Seafood as an honorary consul in 2020, though he **withdrew** in 2023.

As the years have passed, the war in Ukraine has occupied less and less space in Greenlandic media, which may be part of the reason the country's politicians seem more open to welcoming Russia back into the Arctic Council. Though the council was paused as a direct consequence of the war, activities have gradually resumed, **culminating** with welcoming Russia's virtual participation in particular working group projects in early 2024. In 2025, Greenland, Denmark, and the Faroe Islands will jointly take over the council chairship from Norway, thereby assuming an extraordinary responsibility for securing the council's survival and, perhaps, shaping it anew.

Denmark's **increased interest in Arctic affairs** and the impending chairship have further boosted Greenland's efforts to gain more foreign policy authority, seen in the strategy document's repeated emphasis that Denmark's status as an Arctic state depends on Greenland's geostrategic location and continuous membership in the kingdom. The document's subtitle, "An Arctic Strategy," reflects this particularly in two specific issues. The first is the fact that Denmark still does not have an updated joint Arctic strategy, although Greenland's 2024 strategy clearly articulates support for the development of such a common document. The main reason for this is probably found in the second issue—namely, that Greenland demands that the kingdom's Arctic ambassador should be Greenlandic. In late 2024, this delicate issue was finally resolved, and it was **announced** that the new Arctic ambassador will be Greenlandic and will hold office in both Nuuk and Copenhagen.

Greenland's international efforts in general and its ambitions for the Arctic Council chairship in particular suggest a confident administration in Nuuk that strategically uses increased international interest to expand its foreign policy options. But ambitions are one thing; being able to fulfill them is another. Greenland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs only has a total of approximately 20 employees at home and abroad, who altogether take care of the country's diplomatic relations. If action is to follow words, it is inevitable that, in Greenland's **own words**, "It will require more resources for Greenland's diplomatic corps and ministries to implement this strategy."

CONCLUSION

Great power competition between the United States and China, as well as Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine, have pushed Greenland toward more firmly positioning itself—and its envisioned future self—within the Western alliance structure. These developments have increased Greenlandic awareness of external threats and instigated the belief that, as expressed in the strategy, "Greenland needs to reduce its vulnerability and generally assume a greater degree of responsibility" in enforcing the sovereignty of its territory. Greenland's articulated responsibility and enhanced role in its own defense is rooted in

a state-making ambition, but that must be pursued in balance with the country's strong desire for peace and decreased tensions in the Arctic, which is rooted in Inuit culture and traditions. The country's strategy reveals the tension this balancing act entails: "We must remain realistic. But we must not waver when it comes to peace."

Whereas the current Arctic security dynamic has brought new risks to Greenland, it has also revealed new opportunities to enhance the country's self-determination within defense and diplomatic matters that historically have been Denmark's area of competence. As such, Greenland has **secured** a seat at Denmark's defense budget negotiations whenever the Arctic is on the agenda in order to "ensure social sustainability of any new initiatives." At the same time, increased international interest—particularly amplified U.S. attention and Denmark's prioritizing of Arctic affairs—has put Greenland in a favorable position from which its self-government seeks to convert interest into concrete economic and political benefits. The strategy's front page makes this position perfectly clear: "Nothing about us without us." Though a catchy and reasonable mantra, it may prove practically complicated if Greenland's limited diplomatic corps must be present whenever Greenland is on the agenda. To meet that ambition, words need to be followed by cool cash.

*Marc Jacobsen is an associate professor at the Royal Danish Defence College's Center for Arctic Security Studies. He recently co-edited the book **Greenland in Arctic Security**.*



KIRILL KUDRYAVTSEV/AFP via Getty Images

Polar Power Play? Sino-Russian Collaboration in the European Arctic

Rebekka Åsnes Sagild, Senior Researcher, Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, Norwegian Defence University College

The U.S. Department of Defense's July 2024 **Arctic Strategy** clearly delineates the North American Arctic—encompassing U.S. territory in Alaska, as well as Canada and

Denmark's autonomous territory of Greenland—from the European Arctic, which includes Iceland, Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia's Kola Peninsula. In the North American Arctic, China and Russia have exhibited more assertive postures, marked by **military aircraft deployments** and joint **coast guard exercises**. In contrast, the European Arctic has so far not seen any joint military activity, though this could change. For the time being, China's engagement is limited by the region's remoteness, while the Kremlin's desire to safeguard critical infrastructure and military installations on the Kola Peninsula, which houses the Northern Fleet and therefore Russia's strategic nuclear submarines, discourages deeper external involvement.

Nevertheless, several developments warrant scrutiny. These include the potential development of Chinese dual-use research (most prominently ground-based space capabilities on Svalbard), a troubling pattern of sabotage incidents, and the implications of increasing maritime transport activity in the region.

CHINA'S EVOLVING ARCTIC AMBITIONS: NAVIGATING OPPORTUNITIES

Although China lacks direct territorial claims in the Arctic, it has been pursuing regional interests opportunistically through international partnerships. While China's Polar Silk Road (PSR), a part of its Belt and Road Initiative, garnered some temporary hype, the idea has **largely disappeared** from Chinese discourse. Instead, Beijing is adopting a more pragmatic stance that prioritizes economic viability over geopolitical symbolism.

Chinese investment attempts in the European Arctic, excluding Russian territories, have largely faltered due to growing Nordic skepticism and increased government intervention, a trend exacerbated by China's support for Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. Countries like Finland, once regarded as a viable partner to China in the Arctic, have substantially altered their approach, **canceling** Arctic-related projects and **omitting** Arctic cooperation in their recent Joint Action Plan between the two countries—a decision that surprised long-term observers and marked a significant policy shift. Recent attempts by Chinese companies to invest in regional infrastructure have met consistent resistance as well. A notable example is the **shutdown** of Chinese interest in the harbor of Kirkenes in northern Norway. Altogether, there appears to be a convergence in Nordic interests to marginalize China's Arctic presence.

The growing tension between Nordic states and China has significantly altered the latter's opportunities for regional influence. In addition, the enduring suspensions of the Arctic Council and other regional forums have **significantly complicated** communication between European Arctic states and Russia, raising concerns about long-term regional cooperation. In this complex geopolitical landscape, Russia—facing international isolation following its invasion of Ukraine and grappling with economic constraints due to sanctions—may find itself increasingly compelled to accommodate Chinese Arctic interests simply because the Kremlin has few remaining strategic alternatives.

HIGH-ALTITUDE AMBITIONS

China's scientific research in the European Arctic extends across multiple locations. The country's initial research foothold was established in 2004 with the Yellow River Research Station in Ny-Ålesund in Norway, marking China's first permanent Arctic research facility. This intentionally positioned China to expand its polar research capabilities. Svalbard is a particularly strategic location due to its high-latitude position, giving it a pivotal role in polar-orbiting satellite communication and monitoring as well as in climate change research. In 2016, China expanded its Arctic space infrastructure by setting up a satellite ground station in Kiruna, Sweden, and a research observatory in Kárhóll, Iceland. By 2020, Swedish researchers were raising concerns about the potential military applications of the research, which ultimately led to a contract between the Sweden Space Corporation (SSC) and China giving Beijing access to the company's antennas **not being renewed** in 2020. This change demonstrated the growing underlying tensions in China's Arctic research strategy, the ambiguity of dual-use projects, and Nordic countries' close scrutiny of Chinese research activities.

The most consequential aspect of China's Arctic scientific ambitions centers on the development of Chinese ground-based space capabilities, most notably any **early warning** infrastructure, with Russian aid. Strategic ground-based infrastructure in the Arctic would support Chinese ambitions, and such infrastructure could be concealed as dual-use. To date, however, there is no evidence that this is taking place, although the Norwegian government is following the situation closely.

Accordingly, there may be geopolitical dimensions to China's scientific expansion. As the country advances its global space capabilities, China's increased physical presence in Svalbard may be disadvantageous to European Arctic security interests and should warrant international concern.

ARCTIC INFRASTRUCTURE VULNERABILITIES

A worrying pattern of infrastructure sabotage is emerging in the maritime domain, with a growing list of examples in the Arctic and in Northern Europe over the past few years. While not all of these activities have taken place in the Arctic, as the region is characterized by vast areas with little situational awareness, sabotage of critical infrastructure poses a significant risk.

In 2022, a subsea cable **was cut** on Svalbard, limiting its reserve capacity. In 2023, two undersea cables just off the Finnish coast were cut by Hong Kong-registered ship the *New-nor Polar Bear*, which soon thereafter **traveled** to Russian Arctic waters after the Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish authorities failed to respond due to legal constraints. By August 2024, Chinese authorities had acknowledged the vessel's responsibility but characterized the damage as an "accident." The ship's complex ownership—with offices in Shanghai and Moscow—and the timing of the incident have **fueled speculation** about potential Russian orchestration. Another example of sabotage involving a Chinese ship was the November 2024 incident involving the vessel *Yi Peng 3*, which dragged its anchor over 100 miles along the Baltic seabed, **severing two critical fiber-optic cables**. Unlike the previous event, the Danish navy responded swiftly, tracking the ship for several days. German defense minister Boris Pistorius was unequivocal, **stating**: "Nobody believes that these cables were cut by mistake, and I'm not going to believe the theory that it was anchors that were accidentally dragged across these cables."

These incidents suggest a potential emerging strategy of infrastructure disruption. Moreover, the pattern raises critical questions about maritime security, infrastructural vulnerability, and the complex geopolitical tensions among China, Russia, and European nations. This strain amplifies the likelihood of low-threshold conflicts, a dynamic that manifests in the Arctic through sabotage targeting critical infrastructure, with Russia often being the primary suspect, potentially leveraging Chinese vessels as proxies.

INCREASED ARCTIC MARITIME TRANSPORT

The environmental vulnerability of the European Arctic is hard to overstate. As the war in Ukraine continues into 2025, sanctions imposed on Russia, including **wide-ranging recent measures** against the Russian oil sector, have impacted the country's **Arctic ambitions**. For instance, the Arctic LNG 2 gas production project is facing delays and operational challenges, and is **reportedly** rusting on the Gydan Peninsula. In response to sanctions prohibiting Russian ships from docking in European ports and blocking EU oil sales, Rus-

sia has deployed a “shadow fleet” of oil and gas tankers operating the Northern Sea Route (NSR). In 2023, deliveries to and from China accounted for **over 95 percent** of transit cargo on the NSR, a new record, which is taking place under increasingly risky conditions. These vessels often engage in spoofing— the deliberate transmission of counterfeit signals to deceive tracking systems. This practice not only **facilitates the evasion of sanctions**, it also significantly elevates the risk of maritime accidents and **environmental disasters**. As these poorly maintained, often uninsured or underinsured vessels traverse the Norwegian coast, they create a critical threat to the region’s marine ecosystems.

LOOKING AHEAD

In contrast to the North American Arctic, joint Sino-Russian initiatives in the European Arctic **remain limited**, primarily due to China’s lack of maritime presence in these waters and its comparatively lower Arctic priority.

Furthermore, collaborative activities between Russia and the other Arctic nations have been severely restricted. While some minimal interactions persist—such as Norway’s continued engagement with Russia on **limited** search-and-rescue operations—most joint initiatives have been dramatically reduced or suspended.

Russia is strategically seeking to **diversify** its Arctic partnerships, with China emerging as a key potential partner. However, the current collaboration remains cautious and incremental. To date, there is **little evidence** that China has gained substantially greater Arctic access compared to the pre-2022 period. China and Russia’s relationship is characterized by strategic compatibility—particularly in energy trade and a shared desire to challenge U.S. global leadership—yet tempered by underlying mutual caution. As Russia becomes increasingly dependent on China, this delicate dynamic may evolve.

***Rebekka Åsnes Sagild** is a senior researcher at the Norwegian Institute for Defense Studies with the Norwegian Defense University College.*



jONATHAN NACKSTRAND/AFP via Getty Images

The Future Nordic Powerhouse in NATO

Eskil Jakobsen and Øystein Solvang,
Norwegian Institute of International
Affairs

With Finland and Sweden having joined NATO, new opportunities are emerging on the alliance’s northern flank. The Nordic region can now arguably be described as a common operational area given how the prevalent geostrategic challenges transcend intra-regional

borders. Karlis Neretnieks **highlights** three strategic challenges shared by the Nordic NATO countries: (1) defending the Baltic Sea region, (2) defending the North Calotte, and

(3) receiving outside assistance. The defense of Finland's more than 1,300 kilometers of border with Russia can also be added to this list, as it constitutes approximately half of the NATO-Russia border. Although the Nordic countries share all of these concerns, their strategic priorities do not universally align. Sweden and Finland are oriented toward the Baltic Sea and the Baltic region more generally, while Norway is heavily engaged in the maritime domain in the High North and Denmark maintains a broader strategic outlook. Thus, the implications for the region's continued defense integration merit consideration to take full advantage of NATO's Nordic enlargement.

During the Cold War, some experts characterized the geopolitical situation in the Nordic region as "the Nordic balance," with the two superpower blocs holding varying degrees of influence with countries in the region. Denmark, Iceland, and Norway were founding members of NATO. Sweden continued its neutrality policy yet was granted an **informal and secret unilateral security guarantee by the United States**. In the final years of the Cold War, **45 percent** of Swedish defense materiel imports came from the United States. Finland was restricted in its foreign and defense policy by **terms imposed by the Soviet Union** after the Continuation War (1941-1944).

While the implications of Finland and Sweden entering NATO are not to be understated, it is important to note that both countries have cooperated extensively with NATO and relevant member states for decades. As members of the **Partnership for Peace**, and later as **Enhanced Opportunities Partners**, the Finnish and Swedish armed forces routinely participated in NATO exercises and invitational exercises hosted by NATO members. Finland and Sweden have also made substantial contributions to allied operations out of area, often in conjunction with other Nordic force contributions. Examples include the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) and the NATO-led Implementation Force (IFOR) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) in Kosovo, and the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Through the Nordic Defense Cooperation (NORDEF), the Nordic countries have developed strong ties in several areas over the years.

Finland's and Sweden's accession to NATO has improved the conditions for **structured and operational defense cooperation** in the Nordic region, enabling more integrated defense planning for the entire Nordic region. Forces can be deployed, dispersed, and sustained across borders, and assets can increasingly be pooled among allies, potentially yielding significant gains in combat power and contributing to a more versatile and less vulnerable fighting force.

NATO's Regional Plan North West and its Concept for Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area (DDA) family of plans set the parameters for the ongoing strategy for the Nordic region's defense, currently being conducted by Nordic military leaders. Concrete planning is well underway and includes Forward Land Forces (FLF) to be **built up in Finland under Swedish leadership, new Multi-Corps headquarters**, component commands, and enhanced cooperation in all domains. The joint exercise **NORDIC RESPONSE 2024**, held on the North Calotte (straddling the borders between Finland, Norway, and Sweden), included more than 20,000 troops and focused on collective defense of the region.

Strengthened cooperation between the Nordic air forces is a particularly promising area. Norway and Denmark are currently introducing F-35s into service, while Finland will

receive its first F-35 aircraft in 2026, aiming to reach initial operational capability in 2028 and full operational capability in 2030. Construction work on Finnish operating facilities is **already underway**, and U.S.-based pilot training will commence in 2025. Sweden already possesses significant air power, with a fleet of about 100 JAS Gripen 4.5-generation combat aircraft. For decades Swedish Gripens have been employed in combined training events with U.S.-produced combat aircraft operated by Finland and Norway. This cooperation **purportedly** “enhances the combined operational capabilities” of the Nordic countries. Viewed in conjunction with the planned future Nordic fighter fleet **numbering approximately 250 aircraft**, including 143 F-35s, this cooperation underpins the **potential formidability** of future combined Nordic air power.

Pooling of air defense assets is another highly promising opportunity that has become more feasible in the post-accession environment. Sweden operates the U.S. Patriot System for long-range air defense (LRAD); Finland is purchasing the long-range Israeli **David's Sling system**; and Norway has announced that it will acquire LRAD as part of its new **Long-term Defence Plan 2025–2036**. The Norwegian acquisition will fill a crucial capability gap and complement the existing inventory of the short-to-medium-range National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile System (NASAMS), which is also operated by Finland. Coordinating capacity and sectors of coverage across national borders can offer increased security for the entirety of the Nordic region.

By pooling communications and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets can yield significant utility in future efforts to deter and defend. Finland, Norway, and Sweden have different specialties and expertise in establishing and maintaining situational awareness on their territories and beyond. Together with the United States and the United Kingdom, Norway provides world-class maritime domain awareness in the High North. Sweden offers significant surveillance capabilities, including a national airborne early warning and control unit, and Finland brings well-developed resources along its vast land border with Russia. Information sharing practices between the three countries are already substantial and mature. Combined defense plans and perceiving the Nordic region as one area of operation will, however, make working toward a single common operational picture for all countries involved even more salient. However, it will take time before all Swedish and Finnish sensors and radar systems are fully NATO compatible.

There are significant potential gains to be had through improved cooperation in the land domain. Sweden and, particularly, Finland field substantial ground forces, including several combined arms brigades. After the Cold War, Finland maintained what became Europe's largest reserve force, aiming to stand up 280,000 troops **within one month of wartime mobilization**. Following large force reductions culminating in a halt to conscription in 2010, Sweden has expanded its armed forces, with conscription **resuming in 2014 and a further expansion in 2018**. When **tallied** up, the combined land forces in the Nordic region amount to approximately 40,000 active-duty personnel, with total reserves of more than 350,000.

There are already significant overlaps in capabilities and equipment. Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden all operate Leopard 2 main battle tanks and CV90 infantry fighting vehicles. In addition, both Finland and Norway employ the K9 Thunder self-propelled gun. Commonality in platforms, spare parts, and ammunition requirements simplifies the achievement of not only interoperability, but also **interchangeability**.

Despite the promising outlook for improved integration among the Nordic countries on land and in the air, the capability for deterrence and defense in the region is contingent on cooperation with the United States and other NATO allies. The Nordic countries are lacking in key enablers, including air-to-air refueling; joint ISR; and command, control, communications, computers, and information systems (C4IS), particularly relying on U.S. assistance in these areas. Finland, Norway, and Sweden possess some capability for long-range conventional precision strike (LRS), but allied support would still play an important role in this area given the maturity of Russian LRS and air defense capabilities deployed in the region. Furthermore, Norway has **run into hurdles** in its effort to acquire the cutting-edge U.S. LRS systems PrSM and ER GMLRS.

Furthermore, there are challenges that need to be tackled to realize the potential for a future Nordic powerhouse in NATO. The command structure under Joint Force Command (JFC) Norfolk needs to be chiseled out with headquarters possessing adequate capacities for combined-joint command of a variety of ground combat units, surface and subsurface combatants, fighter squadrons, and special operations forces units, including complex ISR and sustainment requirements. The ability of JFC Norfolk to **deconflict and coordinate with forces assigned to JFC Brunssum** is also important. However, the challenge this represents is sometimes overstated, according to operations staff both in the United States and Europe.

Functioning intra-Nordic logistics is a vital prerequisite for achieving enhanced Nordic combat power in the future. There is strong political will and ongoing efforts toward this functionality in Nordic countries, notably expressed through NORDEFECO. In April 2024, the Nordic ministers of defense signed a declaration entitled **Vision for Nordic Defense Cooperation**, in which military mobility and logistics were highlighted as areas where enhanced cooperation is planned. In a recently published **white paper**, the Norwegian government proposed the establishment of a “**strategic corridor**” to enable increased military mobility in the High North.

In addition to intra-Nordic logistics, it is critical to improve the capacity for reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of U.S. and other allied reinforcements. Such reinforcements will primarily arrive by sea and then be transported over land, necessitating substantial rail capacity, road infrastructure, and various resource depots across the Nordic area of operation. Constructing and linking the infrastructure web necessary for functional logistics across the Nordic region is a major challenge and requires long-term funding and competency within the different lines of effort.

Security in the Nordic region relies heavily on **sustained and deepening cooperation with the United States**. As a vital ally for all Nordic countries, particularly in a post-accession environment, the United States provides numerous opportunities for optimizing defense relations in the region. The bilateral Defense Cooperation Agreements (DCA) between the United States and **Denmark, Sweden, and Finland**, respectively, signed in December 2023, and the Supplementary DCA between **the United States and Norway**, signed in February 2024, point toward continuously blossoming Nordic-U.S. defense relations in the years to come. Recent increases in Nordic defense budgets should also help alleviate potential concerns related to uneven burden sharing. However, so-called “beauty contests,” where the Nordic countries compete for U.S. attention and resources, have been raised as a **potential**

challenge. The severity of such dynamics can be considered negligible if the constructive combined defense planning in the Nordic region continues with full steam ahead.

U.S.-Nordic defense cooperation must also be viewed in context with the roles other allies play in the region's security landscape. In particular, the United Kingdom has long played an important role, with a significant footprint in both the Arctic and Baltic regions. During the run-up to Finland and Sweden's accession to NATO, the United Kingdom concluded **mutual security pacts** with the two countries and deployed troops on **exercises** during the ratification process. With Denmark **abolishing** its EU defense reservations in 2022, the European Union could also take on a more important role in Nordic security.

CONCLUSION

Through improved integration, pooling of assets, and cooperation between key allies, NATO can achieve highly effective D&D in the Nordic region in the future. The significant maturity of defense cooperation between the Nordic countries will contribute positively to the feasibility of achieving this. Continuously improving cooperation with the United States and other allies will remain crucial to retain the capacity and strategic depth required to stand up a true Nordic powerhouse in NATO.

***Eskil Jakobsen** is an adviser in the Research Group for Security and Defence at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). **Øystein Solvang** is a research assistant at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI).*

This report is made possible by the generous support of the Lillian and Robert D. Stuart Jr. Center.

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

© 2025 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.